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ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM PROPOSED RULE AVAILABLE FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

Richmond, Feb. 6, 2003—The proposed rule for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) has been released. The 2002 Farm Bill reauthorized and amended the program, which is administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The rule will begin a 30-day comment period from the date published in the *Federal Register*. The proposed rule describes how NRCS intends to implement the EQIP program. Comments from the public will be used to make revisions, if necessary, that will be issued in a final rule.

“The Farm Bill represents an unprecedented investment in conservation on America's working lands, providing a \$17.1 billion increase in conservation over ten years,” M. Denise Doetzer, NRCS state conservationist for Virginia said. “In addition, the Farm Bill offers voluntary solutions for farmers and landowners to comply with the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act and other regulations. EQIP—one of the largest programs in the Farm Bill—is designed to help producers meet the significant environmental regulation they face.”

EQIP is a voluntary conservation program that promotes environmental quality and helps farmers and landowners meet local, state and federal regulations. Funds will help farmers and landowners install conservation practices that protect natural resources by reducing soil erosion, improving water use efficiencies and protecting grazing land.

Through the rule making process, NRCS has streamlined program administration and addressed several primary statutory changes in the proposed rule, including:

- Providing cost share for limited resource and beginning farmers and landowners.
- Ensuring a payment limitation of \$450,000 per qualified individual or entity for all fiscal year 2002-2007 EQIP contracts.
- Providing livestock farmers with cost share assistance for waste storage facilities regardless of size, but the farmers must develop and implement a comprehensive nutrient management plan.
- Allocating 60 percent of EQIP funds towards livestock related practices.

The proposed fiscal year 2004 agriculture budget includes \$850 million for EQIP to install conservation measures such as erosion control and water quality enhancement. Since the EQIP program began in 1997, nearly \$17 million in cost sharing has been provided to Virginia landowners to install conservation practices.

“In Virginia, farmers and landowners are proud of their environmental stewardship and conservation on working lands,” Doetzer said. These practices have improved water quality, pasture productivity, livestock health, nutrient management and are helping ensure future productivity of Virginia’s cropland.”

Additional information on EQIP and other conservation programs is on the Web at <http://nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/products.html>.

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